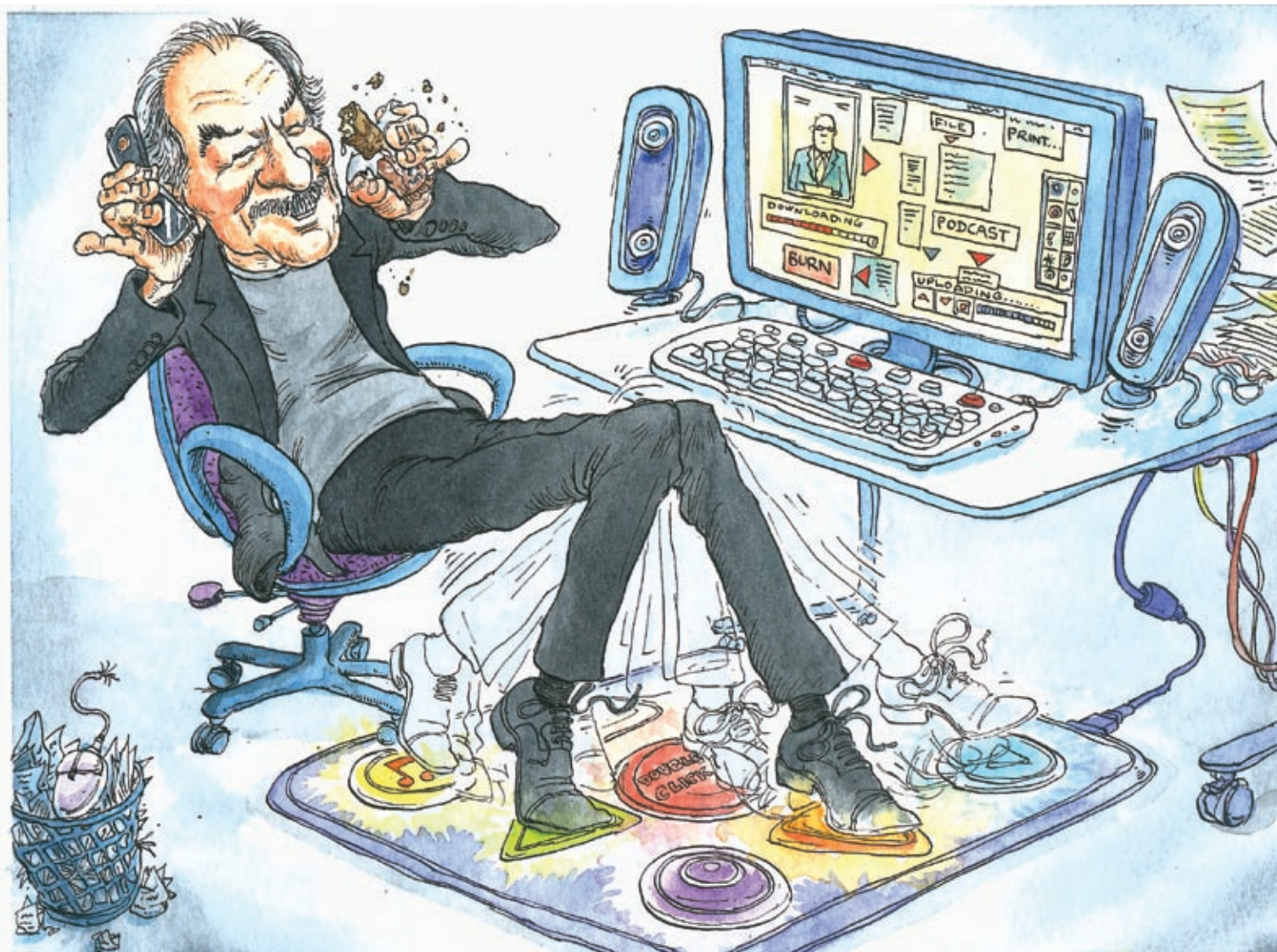




# RANTS & RAVES

Thanks to Microsoft, **Mel Croucher** could soon control his PC by tapping his toes. **Simon Edwards**, meanwhile, has weightier matters on his mind – like how to fill the hole in his back garden

## BOOT COMMAND



**MEL CROUCHER  
RAVES**

Despite my advanced age and retarded lifestyle, I am perfectly capable of driving my motor car while tuning the radio, as I unwrap a Snickers bar, take a phone call and scratch my arse, all at the same time. It's a gift, I know, and it's probably genetic. My mum was a good multitasker in her day. She could do all the above while adjusting her suspenders and playing the accordion, too. Which brings me to computer controls.

During the five decades in which I have been wrestling with computers, I have used all sorts of devices for controlling these willing but mindless electronic beasts. By far the most advanced was a tongue-touch keypad from New Abilities Systems in Palo Alto, which consisted of a nine-button unit and a radio transmitter that fitted in the roof of my mouth. It worked like a dream.

I also liked a device called the HeadMouse, from Origin Instruments, which used an infrared beam on top of the monitor to track a target glued to my brow. The cursor was controlled by head movements and commands were

issued by holding still for a second. Then, of course, there have been numerous voice-recognition systems, most of which seemed to obey my commands only if I talked like Dustin Hoffman with a broken jaw, whereas my natural voice is a cross between Jack Nicholson and Prince Charles.

## PEDAL POWER

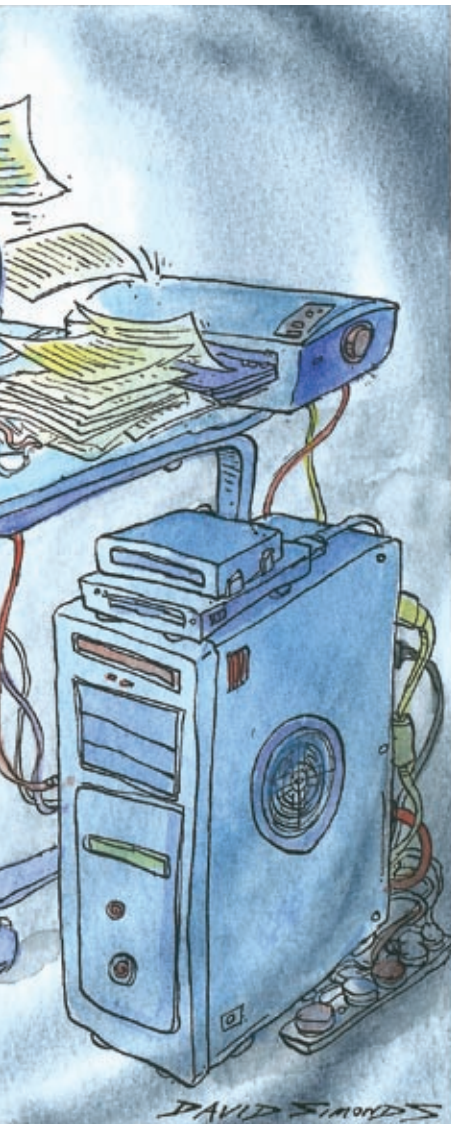
But the control device that has always struck me as the most idiotic is definitely the computer mouse. Even today's cordless optical rodents force me to take my hands off the keyboard every few seconds, interrupt my flow and displace the carefully placed mess

on my desk. Soon, however, I will be able to multitask at my desk just as well as I can in my car, and for the same reason. Foot pedals. That's right, foot pedals. Let's hear it for toe-tapping, heel-clicking, foot-stomping pedal-filia. And it's all thanks to Microsoft, which has revealed the Step User Interface at its Mission Control in Redmond.

The device currently uses one of those entertainment dance pads that you wire up to karaoke machines, but it's early days yet. I am sure miniaturised motion sensors can be fitted into attractive ankle bracelets, like those worn by hookers and criminals under curfew. And I want one. The prospect of physically booting spam emails in the guts is very attractive indeed, and so is playing intimate footsie under the table with Photoshop.

This will be even more rewarding than controlling my car, and I'm sure foot pedals will provide a subtle and instinctive alternative for issuing computer commands. I foresee sentient electronic slippers doing everything that a mouse can do, and I also predict treadle shoes that not only





free up your hands when clicking and pointing, but also generate enough juice to power the computer itself. I can hardly wait to make better use of my right hand when I boot up in the future.

## JUST DO IT!



**SIMON EDWARDS  
RAVES**

Sometimes you've just got to get stuck into a job. I'm building a patio at the moment. Or, more accurately, I have a large hole in my garden full of hardcore. I had fun trying to find a supplier of that on the internet. The garden has been like a quarry for weeks because I know that the next step involves hard work and a sore back. Instead of cracking on, I spend my time worrying that I've not planned the next task properly and so the job never gets finished.

My DIY skills are not great, but my website programming knowledge was non-existent until about two months ago. Around that time I was obliged to learn, and learn fast. My mission, should I

choose to accept it, was to build a website for a sports club of which I am a member. It should allow the head honcho to upload news reports and pictures using a simple interface that anyone with half a brain could use. If I didn't undertake the mission, I would be condemned to doing the updates myself the hard way for an eternity.

There was a lot of pressure to complete this job quickly, not least because it would save me huge amounts of time in the long run. Other members of the club were also grumbling loudly because the current site was in stasis, showing old news for weeks at a time. So, rather than spend ages learning to program, I had to get stuck in and write the management system without procrastinating.

One month later and it was done, and working well. "Bully for you," you might be thinking, "you smug little slap-headed show-off geek". "Fair point," I would reply, but the laboured point I'm trying to make is that, while planning can save you a world of hell, particularly where programming projects and DIY are concerned, if you want to get something done or learn something new, it can be a good idea to throw caution to the wind and go for it.

## THE LEARNING ZONE

So join me, friends, in a super-early New Year's resolution to learn something new about your PC. Something you've always fancied but never dared to try. If you have never fired up Windows Movie Maker, do it. Take some video clips with your digital camera and make silly little films. If you want to do cool 3D animations you could even use the Carrara Studio 2 software on this month's cover disc (we've even provided a step-by-step tutorial on page 209 to help you on your way). Or write a tune, record it and beam it on to the internet (see next month's *Shopper* for a feature on podcasting).

Or you could learn to program, a subject that many of you have voiced an interest in. It helps to have a specific programming project in mind, and maybe you could get some inspiration from other projects freely available on the internet (see this month's *Linux Expert*). Last month, we wrote a massive feature about how to start; this month, we've given away the software you'll need on the cover disc. The feature should still be on your toilet floor, so rescue it now before it gets buried.

Go on, have a go. I'm so hyped now that I'm going straight outside to finish off that patio. Just as soon as I've installed my new patio

design software and done a bit of essential planning, naturally.

## FEEDING FRENZY



**SIMON EDWARDS  
RAVES**

Modern life is fast. As our heads are filled with a never-ending stream of information, we run the risk of overloading our fragile minds. The web, email, radio, TV, friends' websites (aka blogs), the missus and even the lowly newspaper all compete for our attention. If the whole thing is turning into white noise, I have an answer that could prevent you ending your days in a padded room, rocking back and forward in a snug canvas wrap-around number. The answer is: news aggregation.

It doesn't sound as exciting as an internet-connected brain implant, but news aggregation is a fantastic system that lets you scan your favourite websites and view the latest news from each of them in a single place, without you actually having to visit them.

It doesn't stop you receiving useful information, but it does save you lots of time you might otherwise spend visiting lists of handy websites that are adorned with annoying adverts and other distractions. To use news aggregation, you need a program that can read the news feeds supplied by each site. One such program is Feedreader.

Feedreader is a free and open source (see *Linux Expert*, page 232) Windows utility that is available from [www.feedreader.com](http://www.feedreader.com). Install it, and you're well on your way to preventing the information superhighway running you down.

## STREAM ENGINES

Here's how it works. Many popular sites that provide regularly updated news and other articles use a technology called Really Simple Syndication, or RSS. This allows you to stream news to your desktop.

The *Financial Times* provides over 60 different variations of its news online, tailored for readers with different interests. For example, some people will want only the news feeds that relate to 'Aerospace & defence', while others will want 'Media & marketing'.

Signing up for an RSS feed is free, so long as the site in question provides free news. You can't use RSS to bag free headlines from paid-for subscription-based sites. If you do subscribe to a paid-for site, you'll have a username and password to log in. Feedreader will allow you to enter yours so it can log in and grab the site's headlines.

An RSS news feed is a file that contains the latest headlines and a short summary of each news story. My brain is so shot that I only ever read the headlines on websites anyway, or maybe the first paragraph if I'm feeling extravagant. If you're like me, reading RSS feeds will give you all the news you need.

An RSS file is written in a format called XML, so it's not suitable for humans to try to read (although some of us freaks at *Shopper* do occasionally try). You'd think that your web browser would be able to handle it, but Internet Explorer users are in for a rude awakening. You need a special program to read feeds, and Feedreader is a great option.

## ON THE RIGHT TRACK

Before you start, it's a good idea to decide which sites you want to track. Most major news sites, including the BBC and *Shopper*, provide RSS feeds. Look out for an orange button called RSS, ATOM or XML somewhere on the home page. Different sites might use different names for these buttons. ATOM happens to be a different standard for feeds, but we'll leave that to the geeks to worry about. Feedreader can handle both RSS and ATOM files.

To subscribe to a feed, load the site into your web browser and right-click on a feed button. Choose the Copy Shortcut option. Click the Add new feed button in Feedreader and paste the link into the window that appears. You'll now be able to see a regularly updated list of headlines from that site without having to visit it.

By default, the software checks for new updates every hour, so you can expect to see pop-up windows appear in the bottom-right section of your screen regularly if you have an always-on internet connection and subscribe to lots of feeds. You can turn off this notification if you want, and I recommend that you do unless you want to risk a visit to Mr Straitjacket. I'd also advise that you delete most of the feeds that are pre-set in Feedreader or you'll suffer from the information overload you are hoping to solve.

Clicking on a headline will display a summary of the story and an option to read the whole thing. This option loads the website into Feedreader, or you can choose to launch your default web browser in a separate window by double-clicking the headline.

Feedreader is a great program that can keep news junkies up to date but save them lots of time. Time they can now spend doing more important things – such as finishing off the patio. ☑